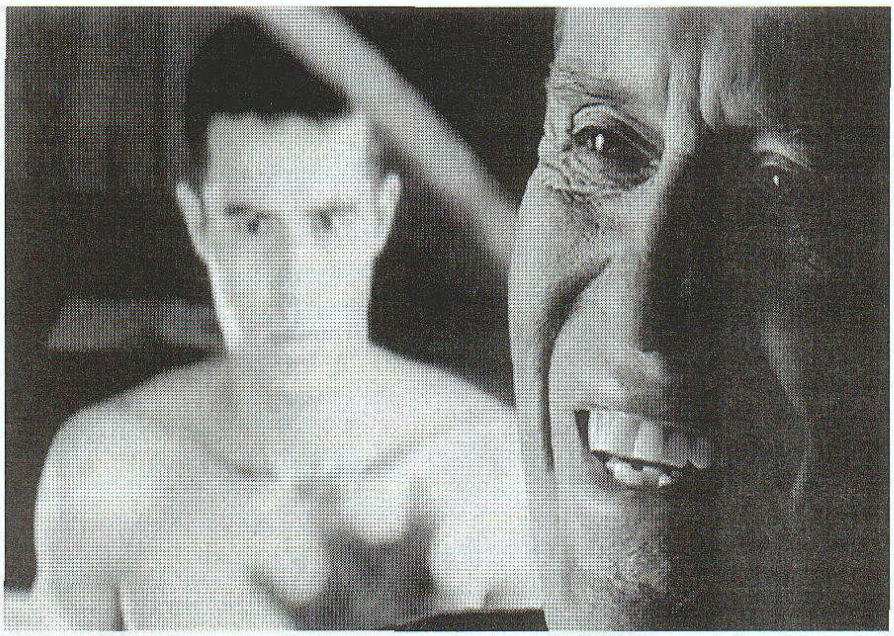
Kenneth Anger, Director: Fireworks *at Sixty*

While not a household name, experimental filmmaker Kenneth Anger has had a massive influence on American cinema. Indeed, names no less illustrious than Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola have repeatedly cited Anger as a major influence on their craft.

Part of Anger's ongoing underground status stems from the fact that he has never made a feature film. Instead, he has relished in remaining defiantly distant from mainstream American culture, creating an *oeuvre* of widely disparate, wildly uneven, and often unforgettable short films. Though his movies are as far away from the Hollywood æsthetic as one could imagine, Anger was born into the belly of the beast, growing up in a wealthy Los Angeles home. Sadly, his early films, which he began making as a teenager, have been lost. The first film that brought him to international notoriety was *Fireworks*, a stunning 1947 film about homoerotic desire, gay bashing, and dreams. Watching this incredible movie now, it's almost impossible to believe that Anger made it when he was seventeen years old. Anger plays a man who tries to pick up some muscular sailors by asking them for a light, but only ignites their fear and hatred, and gets himself beaten up. This film drew immediate admirers, among them Jean Cocteau and Alfred Kinsey, the latter buying the first *Fireworks* print ever sold. It is widely regarded as the first gay narrative film ever made in the U.S.

Since then, Anger has lived and worked throughout Europe and America, creating such films as *Invocation of My Demon Brother* (1969), *Scorpio Rising* (1964), and *Mouse Heaven* (2004). Over the years, he has supported himself in part by writing his notoriously gossip-laden books, most famously *Hollywood Babylon* (first published in French in 1959) and *Hollywood Babylon II*. This past year has seen the premiere of *Anger Me* at international film festivals, Elio Gelmini's excellent feature-length documentary about Anger and his influence. Anger's short films are now being released on DVD for the first time.



A still from the documentary Anger Me. *Photo courtesy Elio Gelmini*

Anger sat down for this interview late in 2006, when he was in Montréal for the Festival du Nouveau Cinéma and to conduct a master class at Concordia University's film school.

— Matthew Hays

Matthew Hays: I find it funny that you began in Hollywood, because your films seem so anti-Hollywood.

Kenneth Anger: No, I'm not anti-Hollywood, not at all. And my films aren't anti-Hollywood. My godfather, Edmund Goulding, directed *Nightmare Alley*, which starred Tyrone Power. Have you seen it? It's a great film. I was taken to the preview of it. I have a silver spoon that says, "From Eddie to Kenny." That was a great film noir.

MH: But you did leave Hollywood for Europe at quite an early stage in your life.

KA: In the late 1940's, when I graduated from Beverly Hills high school, the red menace thing had already begun. They were persecuting some friends of mine who had belonged to a labor youth group during the 30's. They had worked with Columbia Pictures as dancers, but as teenagers they had also been involved with the free lunch program. They were linked with the communist party, and they were going to be investigated. It was more grotesque than terrifying. People did grotesque things. So my friends quit Columbia Pictures. They said they were going to Paris, and they said, "Why don't you come along and be our mascot?" I had studied French and got an A and I wanted to meet Jean Cocteau. And so they said come along and we'll find a place for you to sleep. I had a very convenient entrance into Paris. My duty was to walk my friends' poodle around the Arch of Triumph and, out of respect for the city, make sure to clean up after him.

MH: Do you recall the first film you ever saw?

KA: I was three years old, and I could walk and talk. I was a smart kid. The next year I was acting in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The first movie my grandmother took me to see was *Thunder Over Mexico* [1933]. The film was by Eisenstein. The socialist producer, who was [novelist] Upton Sinclair, got cold feet and stopped the money flow. Eisenstein was ordered back to Russia by Stalin himself. Which was scary, because a lot of his friends were killed. It was a four-hour epic about the grandeur of the very bloody history of Mexico. In these scenes, which were photographed by Eduard Tisse, these shots were so powerful that they were seared into my brain. That was the first movie I ever saw. There's a scene in it where the peasants, who were rebelling against the Spanish, are captured and punished for it. They are buried up to their necks and then the conquistadors who run these large plantations run across them with their beautiful horses until the peasants' brains are bashed out with the hooves. This had

such an impression on me as a child, it was quite some time before anyone could get me on a horse. The peasants in that movie got trampled to death, and it was shown very graphically—including the beautiful leading man, who caught my eye even at that tender age. Eisenstein, who was gay, used a lot of violence in his films. He was a great influence on me. He knew how far to go without going too far. Jean Cocteau also taught me that this was something you must learn. It's a truism that's been forgotten in Hollywood. People just get blasé. There's all this gratuitous violence. I haven't seen *The Departed* yet, which I've heard is full of blood. Which is fine, it's a gangster film, but after a certain point it all just becomes camp, and then you have to say, well, how many gallons was the order on that fake blood?

MH: I'd like to discuss *Fireworks*, one of your early films. It's one that I always show to students in the film history class I teach.

KA: Where do you get the print?

MH: I sometimes rent it from a local video store.

KA: I hate to inform you, but that is probably a pirated print. I don't get any royalties from it. I don't get any money, which is pretty painful, because I live on the edge. These copies are often visually degraded. It's one thing for the Disney company to be pirated all over the world—and they are, particularly in China, openly and with no apology. I'm sure *The Departed* is already for sale in Shanghai for two dollars.

MH: I'm always shocked at how brazen *Fireworks* is.

KA: It's easy to be brazen when you're seventeen and know what you want to do and barely have the means to do it. My model was always Arthur Rimbaud: he was writing magnificent poems that are classic and immortal when he was a teenager. Then he went to Africa and became an arms dealer and never wrote another poem.

MH: But you never became an arms dealer.

KA: No, in spite of the rumors.

MH: Back to *Fireworks*.

KA: I didn't have any microphones, so it was a silent movie. The silent movies are a great art form, but it meant that I couldn't rely on speech or sound. My favorite film in the whole world is *Sunrise*, by F. W. Murnau. That's an extremely Germanic film—the set designer, cinematographer, and director were all Germans. In a daring move by William Fox, who was a kind of genius despite the fact that he went to prison for tax evasion, he imported these Germans and gave them a free hand with all the state-of-the-art technology of the studios at the time. That's why *Sunrise* is so beautiful. They made the whole thing in the studio, there were no actual exterior shots.

MH: So what inspired *Fireworks*?

KA: A historical event happened in 1944. In the immediate postwar years, I was bowled over by a riot. It was called the Zoot Suit Riot. It took place in the summer of '44.

What happened was that there was a racial antagonism between Mexican cool cats who were living in L.A. And they weren't in the service either because they weren't citizens or because they had evaded the draft. They were dressed in these silk and satin zoot suits. They looked like cartoons, which was on purpose. And the look cost quite a bit of money. The American sailors and the guys in the service took a big antagonism to these guys, because they were slackers. There was some conflict over a girl, as one was supposed to go with a sailor but ended up with a zoot-suiter. The sailors descended on the zoot-suiters. I was in that neighborhood in downtown L.A., and I saw this riot from about a block away. The sailors in their summer whites and little round hats, they were chasing down the Mexicans wearing zoot suits and ripping them to shreds. The Mexican guys were practically naked, and the sailors were beating them up. No one was killed but some were hurt badly enough that they had to go to the emergency room. A lot of zoot suits were shredded, and it was the front page story in *The L.A. Times*. I still have the newspaper clipping somewhere.

I have vivid dreams, which are like movies. And they're always silent. The dreams kept persisting about this event. They were at night, and these white uniforms would come out of the night and attack. But it was never clear who it was in the dream. Finally, the dreams evolved into people chasing me.

MH: It's such an intensely homoerotic film.

KA: Yes, it's about being attracted to something you're afraid of. You're attracted to something that's particularly dangerous, like a rough, tough man can be, like a working man can be, or even a college professor, who knows. The idea of being attracted to a stranger... sometimes if you look at someone a split second too long, it can happen that they'll say, "What are you looking at?" I knew not to do what the young man in the film does, which is to ask them for a light for their cigarette. Back in the 40's, that was an old pick-up line. Among subterranean gay culture at the time, that was a way to get picked up.

MH: Did you feel any affinity at all with what was the gay movement?

KA: I went to Europe in 1950 after *Fireworks* won an award in 1949. Jean Cocteau gave me an award for the film. He wrote me a letter by hand, which must be worth something by now. In French, he wrote that your work comes from the deep night from which all great works emerge. He was paraphrasing what Jung had said about artistic creation. Henri Langlois then took to me. He loved to eat and it showed. He was the curator of the Cinématheque Française. After he met me at the Cocteau reception in Paris, I said I'd like to stay on in Paris and loved French movies. He said, "Well, I need an assistant so I'll just hire you."

MH: I continue to be shocked and unsettled when I read that you're not really getting much in the way of royalties. How can that be?

KA: It's so easy to pirate things these days. But you know, I have never been a businessman. My father wanted me to be an aircraft engineer, like him. I said that I wanted to be an artist. He said no one can make a living from that. I gave him a list of people who had, including Picasso. He cut me out of his will—left me a dollar.

MH: What about publishing the third volume of *Hollywood Babylon*?

KA: The publishers read it and said there are too many hot wires in there. The Church of Scientology people are very prone to sue. But I said if you cut the stuff out about John Travolta and Tommy Cruise and Karen Black, you've cut the heart out of the book.

People compare me to Andy Warhol. But he had the Midas touch. He could take a piece of crap and sign his name to it and they'd sell it for a fortune. That's not me.

Matthew Hays' book, The View from Here: Conversations with Gay and Lesbian Filmmakers, *will be published by Arsenal Pulp Press in May.*